

Berel Dov Lerner, *Rules, Magic, and Instrumental Reason: A Critical Interpretation of Peter Winch's Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Routledge Studies in Twentieth Century Philosophy, 8. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. viii + 192 pp. ISBN 0415253020 (cloth); \$105.00.

KEVIN SCHILBRACK

Peter Winch published his provocative anti-positivist manifesto, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* in 1958, and he drew out the book's implications for the study of religions in his essay "Understanding a primitive society" in 1964. In the book, he draws on Wittgenstein's later philosophy to argue that meaningful behavior always involves following social rules, and since following a rule involves understanding it, the goal of the social sciences cannot or, at least, should not be the explanation of behavior, as if people obey laws the way that falling apples thoughtlessly obey the law of gravity. The social sciences should instead be interpretive, with the goal of understanding. Furthermore, the study of religion (Winch took the example of Zande witchcraft) must first identify the point of the practice and should not assume that all cultural practices are like science in that they aim at controlling the natural world. Together, the two works inspired an enormous debate on the scope of rationality and the nature of religion.

The only other book-length work on Winch I know is Colin Lyas' *Peter Winch* (Acumen, 1999). But whereas that book is introductory, expository, and sympathetic, this one is critical—and judiciously so. With a philosopher's eye, Lerner sorts out and clarifies Winch's analysis of meaningful behavior, his arguments against explanatory social science, and his reading of Zande magic. He also surveys the different criticisms of Winch's project, sometimes defending him, but often identifying where Winch's claims are ambiguous or his arguments weak. Lerner rightly says that Winch's work can be both inspiring and infuriating, but Lerner has a gift for straightforward writing and good examples. With the exception of an unnecessary chapter on two of Winch's epigones, his critique cuts to the important issues.

For Lerner, the central problem with Winch's approach is that he so resolutely overlooks the role of instrumental action in human life in favor of attention to communicative action. As Lerner puts it, Winch favors the definition of humans as language users over that of humans as tool users. This leads Winch to an overly contemplative understanding of the social sciences in which they provide us with the

different possibilities of making sense of human life but don't provide us with practical information about predicting or controlling human behavior. Winch's ignoring of instrumental action also leads him to an expressivist reading of Zande witchcraft in which magical and religious practices symbolically express one's attitudes towards the contingencies of life but do not seek to control those contingencies. Lerner rightly argues that Winch's interpretation of the Azande is powerfully contradicted by ethnographic record. He also recommends an appreciation of what he calls "instrumental pluralism", by which he means to call attention to the fact that different instrumental practices operate with different standards. Psychotherapy, for example, has a lower expectation of success than engineering, though both are instrumental. Instrumental practices also vary as they permit more or less pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, more or less risk-taking, or more or less attention to aesthetics.

Lerner's instrumental pluralism is a valid observation about the variety of standards at work in instrumental practices, and Zande magic may include such concerns (an idea that Lerner suggests but does not explore). But it is not plausible that if Winch appreciated Lerner's idea he could accept the instrumentality of magic. For one thing, nothing Winch says denies this variety, and for another, Winch's thesis is not that different modes of social life are "different", but rather that there are some that are not instrumental. I think that one sees here a risk run by those who oppose Winch, namely, that his position is so dramatic and one-sided (social science is interpretive, not explanatory; religion is expressive, not instrumental) that it is easy for his critics to fall into the opposite extreme. Lerner is convincing that Winch is wrong to exclude explanation from the social sciences and instrumental interests from religion and magic. But it would be nice to see Winch's position not just answered, but "taken up" or synthesized, in Hegel's sense, into a more complete philosophy of the social sciences that appreciates the role of both interpretation and explanation. And cannot a religion—or perhaps even a single prayer—pursue both practical concerns and metaphysical contemplation? This said, however, Lerner has produced a valuable guide to Winch's Wittgensteinian approach to the study of religion. Clearly written and argued, it is in fact the best book on the subject.

Wesleyan College
4760 Forsyth Road
Macon, GA 31210-4462
USA